

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 13

Number 1 *The Dreaming Tree*

Article 44

Winter 3-1-1994

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College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation

Nichols, Sharon (1994) "Engendering," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 44.

Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol13/iss1/44>

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ENGENDERING

by Sharon Nichols

How am I female,
I ask myself,
And I think of growing up girl-child in America
in the 'Fifties.
How do I begin to explain?
Being female is at once
a state of being and a host of roles.
It involves a ration of convention,
a measure of prescription,
and a fair degree of circumspection.
It is menses and worry and embarrassment
over the implications of fertility cycles,
budding breasts, and, "What does this all mean, anyway?"

It is in the giggles and, yes, the snickers
of girls and boys struggling
with their own biology.

Nature brings us face-to-face with
the real Life-World that
is beyond Child-dom.

It is deferring
first to all Adults,
and later, to males.
It is "Lady-like behavior,"
and "Girls can't do that":
training grounds
for wife-dom and fiefdom.

It is in the nether realms of
"I wanna grow-up to be's,"
hitting the brick walls
of New Math in seventh grade
With the resounding echo
of doors slamming shut in
the corridors of my future.
It is the finality of "Clicks!" of
steel doors being locked shut tight
with my pounding fists
bouncing soundlessly off.

My femaleness is in Family
and giving a doll Tea-Party
while my brothers
threw the football with Dad.
It is the sting of the forever Put-Down,
"Get your sissy little ass back in the house
where you belong," when I tried to join them
and was knocked down
by a deliberate bomb,
meant to hurt, meant to humiliate.
It is in the unkind words
which like football bombs
are meant to knock your breath right out
until when you get back your voice,
the Game and The World
have moved on to other things.

It is in the prepping , role-playing girl-child,
the docile student, cooperating with teachers,
getting along; training, training,
always in training...
For the proper girl begets
the proper lady,
begets the proper respect
from the proper eligible male
And lo! A wife is made
in the image of all the other girls
so trained to be submissive,
to hand over Power completely
into the alien hands
of a supposed superior Other.

Being female in America is to be victimized
by myths of Justice and Fairness.
It is borne in our Silencing
so that we can not even speak of the injustice.
Indeed, it is in our blinding,
so that too frequently
we do not even see our own blindness.

I ask a denying world,
"Why is it 'female' to be made victim?"
This being stigmatized by our gender, in a constricted society
that never even afforded us the simple dignity
of the right to create our own dreams.
Instead, our dreams were to be of The Prince,

kissing our sleeping lids awake
into fawning worshipfulness,
in gratitude for making it seem as if we were living in life,
rather than through it.

Being female is a thing above all to be survived,
not because of biology,
but because we erroneously have believed biology is destiny.
It is in our collective trip to Oz,
eerily hoping, mindlessly skipping along, wistfully dreaming,
tentative, and oh-so-plaintive in our cries of,
"If I only had a Voice,"
and expecting the great charlatan Wizard to actually give it to us.
It is to be found in the Catch 22
of a society that would
both deny us roles and role models, then blame us
for buying the false dreams of Motherhood and apple pie.
It is the paradox of the "Daddy knows Best" school of thought
(with the arbitrary edict, "No wife of mine is going to work),
and the reality of domestic violence,
economic vulnerability, and divorce statistics.
It is in the promise "You can be anything you want to be,"
coupled with the necessity of struggling against barriers
every step of the way. It is coping with a stacked economic deck.
Being female is in the frustration of wanting to speak,
wanting to be heard, wanting to be seen,
wanting to be believed, wanting to be taken seriously,
wanting to be in accepted with the same assurity
that my brothers have always been.
Being female is choking on the unasked question,
"Is that so much to want, after all?"
And knowing the only honest answer out there is
"Yes, it is."